

*Says VA failed to measure up to past assurances*

**WASHINGTON** - At a Congressional hearing today on implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell challenged the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to lay out a plan to ensure veterans receive the GI Bill benefits they have earned in a timely manner.

"Late benefit payments has placed undue stress on students at a time when they need to be focusing on their studies," Mitchell said. "We need to ensure that no more benefits are delayed."

Mitchell questioned Keith Wilson, the VA's Director of Education Service, who was tasked with overseeing the implementation of the Post 9/11 GI Bill, at a hearing of the Veteran's Affairs Economic Oversight Subcommittee.

"This is not your first appearance before this subcommittee," said Mitchell. "You have appeared before it several times since the GI Bill was signed into law, to keep the committee members apprised of the VA's efforts to implement the GI Bill. You offered assurances that the VA would be ready by August 1. You even brought in a detailed timeline to show us how the VA would be ready by August 1. In February, Mr. Adler of New Jersey asked if you if the VA needed 'more tools to accomplish the goal of program implementation.' And you responded, by stating, 'This legislation itself came with funding. That funding at this point has adequately provided us what we need for implementing payments on August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009.'"

"So, what I would like to know," said Mitchell, "is two things -- how are we supposed to believe the assurances you offer today? And knowing how interested Congress is in implementation of the GI Bill - once you knew you were running into problems - why didn't you let us know? Why did we have to first hear about it from veterans and read about it in *Army Times*?"

Wilson replied by acknowledging the VA should be held accountable, "You rightfully call us out in terms of not providing timely service to all veterans. We acknowledge that."

Wilson said that the VA worked to update the subcommittee throughout the process but offered, "If we did not meet those expectations then we need to be held accountable for that."

The Webb-Mitchell Post 9/11 GI Bill was signed into law last year. The first benefits under the program began to be disbursed on August 1, 2009. Tuition and fee payments go directly to institutions of higher learning while allowances for books and living expenses go directly to students. However, tens of thousands of veterans have still not received their benefits due to slow processing of certificates by the VA and delays in submission of proper enrollment documentation by higher learning institutions. [Source: [New Jersey Star Ledger](#), October, 2, 2009]

In September, Mitchell wrote multiple letters to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs asking for a full accounting. [Source: [State Press](#), October, 6, 2009].

At today's hearing Mitchell asked Wilson to lay out the VA's plan to prevent similar delays next semester. Additionally, Mitchell warned the VA to carefully review their process for awarding bonuses for Fiscal Year (FY) 2009, the year the VA was working to implement the bonuses.

"I have held two oversight hearings on improper bonuses within the VA," Mitchell said referring to the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee he chairs. "Regardless if you work on Wall Street or Main Street, or in your case on Vermont Avenue, your pay should match your performance. I think the VA must think long and hard about giving out plush bonuses for FY 09 while so many veterans are still waiting for the benefits they have earned and scrambling to make sure they have the money to pay for school, books and housing."

An estimated 2.1 million members of the military who have served on active duty since September 11, 2001, including activated reservists and members of the National Guard, will be eligible for up to four years of education benefits, including stipends for housing and books. Veterans will also have up to 15 years after they leave active duty to use their education benefits.